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Impact of Culture and Religion in Great Britain Today

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Abstract

In the last fifty years, Christianity has been facing a sudden decline in Great Britain. This is mostly due to globalization and the changes in lifestyle that it has brought about. Christians have faced these changes in different ways. While some support consumerism and globalization, some reject and condemn it. Also, there are those who seek spiritual fulfilment in other religions, particularly Islam and New Age. The Christian Church is no longer regarded as the highest religious authority and its outdated standpoints over controversial social issues such as homosexuality and abortion are what many Christians resent and what is making them drift apart from their Church and their faith. The Church is perceived by a growing number of Christians as intolerant and hostile rather than welcoming. With both globalization and the inflexibility of the Church, people find it challenging to remain true Christians. Thus, the number of practicing Christians is rapidly decreasing while the number of nominal Christians is rising.

Keywords: Christianity, culture, globalization, decline, community

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity has met with numerous challenges in the past and has been facing a rapid decline in Britain since the 1960s (Crabtree). The British have been willingly renouncing a part of their identity and this paper will investigate why this is so. For 1400 years Christianity was a crucial part of the British culture, but nowadays, life in Great Britain has become highly secularized (“Religion in the United Kingdom”). To the British, Christianity was not just a religion, it was a lifestyle. However, the modern consumer society has had a negative impact on the Christian culture. A minority of Christians are actively practicing Christianity while the rest only declare themselves as Christians. Modernity has brought more than just technological advances, it has brought an entirely different way of life. Consumerism is taking its toll and on the one hand, Christians are focusing more on material things than on their spiritual lives, and on the other, those seeking spiritual peace are turning to other religions, such as Islam or New Age. The Christian Church, once the highest religious authority, is struggling to keep up with the changes modernity has brought upon the society. In addition, burning social issues such as homosexuality are making people turn away from their Church and look elsewhere for spiritual guidance.

1. CHRISTIANITY IN GREAT BRITAIN

The role of Christianity in the British society today is much different than it was in the past. In the beginning, Christians were forbidden to practice their religion and were being persecuted, banished and treated as outcasts. Still, their religion held its believers together while they refused to renounce their faith. Although Christianity has been part of the British identity throughout its history, today only a minority of the British are practicing Christians.

1.1. Beginnings of Christian Britain

Christianity, as many other religions and movements, started out as a cult. Unlike other cults, however, Christianity requested complete and utter loyalty from its members and because of its intolerance of other deities and its secrecy, Christians were persecuted (“Christianity in Britain”). This changed with Emperor Constantine, who realized that uniting his people under one religion with one god could possibly bring him military success (“Christianity in Britain”). Thus, from 313 AD, Christianity was allowed to be practiced in the Roman Empire and, although Paganism was still the most prominent cult during the 4th century, Christianity started becoming widespread (Lambert).

For Venerable Bede, the famous monk and writer, Christian Britain was a part of God’s master plan (Ross). Christianity came from two directions, the Celtic Church and the Roman Catholic Church, with the mission of St. Augustine to Aethelbert, the king of Kent (Ross). The story tells that Aethelbert believed Catholics to be magicians and insisted to meet them in the open air to make sure that they were unable to cast a spell on him (Ross). He allowed the Christian monks to preach in Kent and, eventually, converted to Christianity (Ross). By the end of the 7th century, all of England was nominally Christian (Ross).

1.2. Christianity Today

Christianity is the predominant religion in the United Kingdom and most of its citizens identify themselves as Christians. It has been considered as the nation's core religious and moral identity (Brown n.pag.). Today, however, it seems that Christianity is on a rapid decline in the UK. While the majority profess to being Christians, only a minority are practicing churchgoers. For a thousand years, Christianity had an immense impact on all aspects of everyday life, and yet it took only fifty years for it to severely decline. "In unprecedented numbers, the British people since the 1960s have stopped going to church, have allowed their church membership to lapse, have stopped marrying in church and have neglected to baptize their children" (Brown n.pag.). In turn, their children have stopped attending Sunday school and had no habit of churchgoing (Brown n.pag.). In 2001, 71.6% of the British population declared themselves Christians; for many, a highly inflated figure (Kettel, 452). "According to Brierley, the scale of erosion is such that Christianity in the UK is now on course to be superseded by Islam in terms of actively practicing members by 2035" (qtd. in Kettell 425). The rise of secularism and the internal tension within Christianity over issues such as abortion and homosexuality (Kettel 425) are some of the reasons why Christians are losing faith in the tradition they cherished for centuries. A recent poll by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that faith in general is now perceived by many as intolerant and irrational and the Christian Church has long dealt with accusations of disrespecting basic human rights and limiting people's freedom (Kettel 425).

Today, two thirds of the British population have no real connection to any religion or church and between 1979 and 2005, half of the Christian population stopped going to church on Sundays (Brown n.pag.). British Social Attitudes Survey, the main social research tool in Great Britain, states that 57.7% of Britons declared themselves as having no affiliation to any

of the religious groups (Brown n.pag.). The problem with the rest of the population, those claiming to be religious, is that only a minority actively practice it. In *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Grace Davie states that the majority of the English who claim to be religious and believe in God actually do not participate in organized religion (qtd. in Crabtree). We are witnessing an entire cultural circle falling apart. Christianity survived the Reformation and the Enlightenment period, which clearly shows that no religion can be suppressed if there are people willing to practice it. And this is where the real problem lies; there are less and less people who are willing to be active Christians. The modern society has brought about such drastic social changes that some are perceiving Christianity, and religion in general, as something redundant. Instead of the Christian culture, consumerism is becoming one of the core parts of the British identity and people are reacting differently to it. Some choose to dismiss their religion in general, and some are deciding to join various new religions, many of which are created by the consumer society in order to promote material abundance.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETY LIFESTYLE ON THE CHRISTIAN CULTURE

With such an emphasis on the material aspect of life, it is hard not to get caught up in the new, modern lifestyle. There seems to be little or no room left for spirituality and religion because Christian values are so different from those promoted by consumerism. Still, there are those who want both material abundance and spiritual peace. To keep the consumerism present in the lives of those wanting to be spiritual, new religions were created, and the most prominent of those is the one called New Age. In addition, Christians who have lost belief in their faith are seeking spiritual peace and turning to other religions, such as Islam.

2.1. The Impact of Globalization

Since the 1960s, the role of Christianity in everyday life is far lesser than it was before. Christianity promotes modesty as well as, the importance of immaterial, spiritual and eternal values, while the modern world emphasizes the need for material things and promotes “worldly” pleasures. The values of Christianity and those of the modern world are in conflict now more than they ever were before. It seems virtually impossible to be a true Christian and a modern man/woman at the same time.

According to author and biopsychologist Nigel Barber, Atheism prevails most in developed countries and studies have shown that Atheism increases in countries with a well-developed welfare state and equal distribution of income (qtd. in Savastio). His main thesis is that religion declines as personal wealth grows and claims that people have less reason to believe in the supernatural when the world around them provides for their needs (qtd. in Savastio). His researches show that the majority of the world will have no need for religion by the year 2041 (qtd. in Savastio).

2.2. New Age

What Nigel Barber cleverly points out is that people do not need religion if they already have material abundance. However, there are those who seek both material abundance and spiritual peace. And what better way to combine the two than by creating a new so-called religious movement that promotes spiritual peace while stressing the need for material things as well? The problem with people following the New Age philosophy is their lack of knowledge of its roots and its true purpose, which is to promote consumer society.

Social changes that happened during and after World War II affected mostly young adults who, as a result, started joining new religious movements (Beckford 29). The term *new religious movements* “refers to organized attempts to mobilize human and material resources for the purpose of spreading new ideas and sensibilities of a religious nature” (Beckford 29). Some of these new movements are Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, Divine Light Mission, the Children of God/Family of Love, the Rajneesh Foundation and the Nichiren Shoshu (Beckford 30). The problem with these is that none of them have more than a few thousand active members, making it impossible for them to build a new cultural circle around themselves and to have a serious impact on the society (Beckford 30). While they do recruit thousands upon thousands of people every year in their training and therapeutic sessions, only a minority of them chooses to be a full-time member (Beckford 30).

What distinguishes New Age from all of these less popular religions is its emphasis on spiritual peace and the ways of achieving it. New Age is not an organization, it has no clergy or Holy Scriptures (Robinson). It is now becoming more than a group of people getting together and lighting aromatherapy candles, it is becoming a way of life, an entire new culture. While Christianity celebrates martyrs, poverty and virtue, New Age is all about enjoying abundance, focusing on self-growth and earthly pleasures. Christianity promoted

chastity, but New Age gives people sexual freedom. All of this, of course, makes it very appealing. But with its new principles, New Age also introduces the decaying of moral and social values. “For many, spirituality has little or nothing to do with economics and politics” (Carrette and King 60). This is because the principles of New Age are so appealing that people do not take time to investigate its roots and true meaning. What they do not understand is that the roots of New Age and spirituality date back to the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, when “the underlying principles of liberalism were born”(Carrette and King 60). Since religion had such an impact on the cultural and political life, European intellectuals wanted to establish a new way of thinking that will not be in conflict with the religious beliefs, religion and the Church (Carrette and King 60). Thus, New Age was born.

The Enlightenment is a period characterized by the separation between Church and religion. It is a time when people were encouraged to question everything they knew and to develop critical thinking. It was a time focused predominantly on the individual. Most of the intellectuals at the time were against the Church as an institution, which resulted in atheism, rationalism, materialism and deism to be born. During that period, more and more people were getting educated, magazines and newspapers were published and social life in general was thriving. Books were being translated and people gained access to information and different types of literature. Even though Christianity was still very much present in the lives of the British during the Enlightenment era, people no longer blindly believed the teachings of the Bible and were starting to form their own opinions and beliefs.

As previously mentioned, people do not take time to investigate what the New Age movement really is. This is because the teachings of New Age appeal to them and they want to believe them, regardless of whether they are true or not. They fear that, if they dig a little deeper, they will find something they do not like and the New Age philosophy will lose its credibility. If the masses are told that sexual freedom and materialism are good for them, they

will believe it because they want to and will have no reason or desire to investigate the roots of these teachings. Values posed by Christianity are such that only a minority possesses them. Nobody really enjoys poverty and modesty and so, today's modern culture is the perfect market for movements such as New Age. Just like everything else, New Age is all about money and consumerism. Essentially, it encourages people to spend money and argues that material possessions will make them spiritually fulfilled. And all you have to do to get the money to buy expensive trinkets is to just be happy and think positively.

When a Christian takes a look at New Age and its philosophy, he sees something predicted long ago in the Bible

When the disciples asked Jesus what would characterize the last days just prior to His return, He explained that it would be a time of the worst religious deception the world had ever seen. He said sound doctrine would be despised and wondered if there would be any faith left whatsoever on the earth when He returned (Luke 18:8). ... He characterized the last days as a time of religious deception - or - deception in religion such as false messiahs, false prophets, false miracles, and false doctrines. (Shriner)

The biggest problem with New Age is that it has adopted many names, one of which is "Positive Christianity" (Shriner). New Age does not deny the existence of God, but argues that God is just one of the names for the divine energy, which is the very essence of life and from which all good comes to us. It distorts the traditional Christian beliefs and adjusts them to its philosophy, making it easy for Christians to see New Age as something their religion would approve of. New Age frequently cites the Bible and interprets it in such a way that it seems that the Bible itself promotes New Age beliefs.

Today, the New Age is becoming more and more popular in Great Britain. The Festival of Body, Mind and Spirit is held every year in Earls Court, London, and it attracts thousands of people (Dye). "According to Gallup, 59% of the school children believed in astrology in 1984

and (Dye). Today, one in seven people in Britain Britons consults some one of the 60,000 of the alternative therapists in the UK (Dye). Despite its growing popularity, the British still know very little about New Age and perceive it as having something to do with hippies, meditation, positive thoughts, vegan diet and miracle healing (Dye). That is where the biggest problem lies – people simply do not know what new Age is about and it is gaining more popularity every day. New Agers say that the human should accept his own divinity and equates humans with God (Dye). It denies the existence of sins and states that the only reason every single human on Earth does not have godlike powers is because he is unable to think right and wield the powers of his subconscious mind. It may seem ridiculous to someone who is hearing about it for the first time, but to New Agers, it is very real. They try to tap into the spiritual realm and its powers which, according to Christianity, is not only blasphemous, but dangerous. Such doings are borderline sorcerous and the Bible warns Christians never to tamper with the spiritual realm (Dye). However, since the Church and the Bible have strict rules for Christians, those who feel rejected and unable to conform to them will seek spiritual peace elsewhere.

2.3. Islam

According to some predictions, by the year 2021, Islam might be the predominant religion in the United Kingdom (Phillips). Over the last few years, there have been numerous studies showing that Islam is growing at an astronomical rate in the United Kingdom (Phillips). One of the reasons for this is that the Muslims are far more successful at passing down their faith on to their children than Christians are and are much more involved in practicing their religion. “In 2012, research published in a sociology journal showed that 77% of actively practicing Muslim families successfully perpetuate their faith to the next generation, in

contrast to only 29% in actively practicing Christian families and 65% in other religions” (Phillips). In addition to this, the Muslim News stated that:

The study, ‘Intergenerational transmission of Islam in England and Wales: evidence from the Citizenship Survey’ by academics from Cardiff University, also found that 98% of Muslim children surveyed said they had the religion their parents were brought up in, compared with 62% of Christians and 89% of other religions. The team analysed data from the Home Office’s 2003 Citizenship Survey data, using 13,988 replies from adults and 1,278 from young people aged 11 to 15. (qtd. in Phillips)

When we compare the 77% of Muslim families successfully passing down their faith on to their children with only 29% of Christian families doing the same (Phillips) it is clear that the retention rate is an important factor when it comes to the number of Muslims increasing in Britain. One important factor in the retention rate is education.

Muslim children tend to lead busy lives, often attending religious education classes outside school three or more times each week on top of any other commitments they have. They typically learn to read the Qur’an in Arabic. They also learn a great deal about their faith from parents and other family members. Religion can have an especially important role for minority communities in keeping together the bonds between families from the same ethnic background. (qtd. in Phillips)

Although the Muslim children attend schools with Christian children, the role that education plays in their lives is very different. The Muslim parents are usually much more involved and ensure that their children get a suitable Muslim education regardless of the type of school the children attend (Phillips). Christian parents often fail to recognize the importance that education plays in passing Christianity on to the next generations.

Moreover, another important factor when it comes to children being religious or not is the community they are brought up in.

Muslims are raised to think in very communal and corporate terms, so that to grow up and abandon the faith is equivalent to abandoning one's own people. By contrast, Christians within Britain (and sadly throughout much of the Western world) tend to think very individualistically. Even when faith is perceived to be about more than one's own spiritual interiority, it is still thought to be primarily an individualistic experience. Consequently, a Christian child can grow up and abandon the faith without feeling that he or she is also abandoning his or her own people. (Phillips)

The role that community plays cannot be overstated. If the children are taught to think that their religion is a means of remaining close to their community, they will have no desire or reason to think that religion is something purely individualistic (Phillips). As opposed to Christian culture, Islam has not been affected by globalization and consumerism. While the Christian Church still holds and promotes the same values as it did centuries ago, its culture has changed and its believers no longer strive to live in harmony with their faith. Muslims, however, do the opposite. They value the virtues posed by their religion and understand that keeping their community away from modernity will keep their society close and their religion preserved. Christians, however, waste too much time trying to be modern and keeping up appearances. These days, people are made fun of when they proclaim themselves practicing Christians while Muslims take great pride in practicing their faith.

Another problem regarding the Islamisation of Great Britain is the number of people belonging to other religions, Christianity included, converting to Islam. When we take a look at how modern our society is and how strict and even dated Islam seems to us, it is surprising that this is so. What is even more surprising is that the majority of converts to Islam are women. Between 2001 and 2010, the number of British people converting to Islam went from 60,000 to 100,000 (Phillips). A study by Pew Forum states that the number of Muslims in the United Kingdom is currently 2.9 million, which accounts for 4.6% of the population

("Religion in the UK"). When we compare the recent findings with those made in 2001, when the Muslims accounted for 2,8% of the population ("Religion in the UK"), we can see how this can be a real problem and a threat to the Christian culture in the United Kingdom. If these numbers continue to grow over the next few years, by the year 2030 Britain will have more Muslims than Kuwait (Doughty). One of the reasons for such a strong conversion rate is the modern culture. The modern society has brought about more than just technology, it has brought new moral values as well. For many, the modern society is highly immoral and has no real values. Everything revolves around money and material possessions with little or no room left for the spiritual part of our lives. For those who researched Islam more carefully, it is clear that its traditions like frequent praying and modesty are not a means of proving that you're worthy of God's love but a means of achieving self-control (Mistaen). The strict rules Islam poses on its believers is, surprisingly, very appealing to converters. It gives them a sense of direction, something Christianity is said to fail to provide to its believers. While Christianity does have a fixed set of rules one is expected to follow, those rules fail in practice. This is not to say that Christians do not follow any rules or traditions of Christianity, but Muslims are far more successful in this practice. Since Islam is so involved in the lives of its believers, it also gives them a sense of identity. Again, not that Christianity does not do the same, but we have to accept that Islam is simply more successful. Modernity has brought a seemingly easier lifestyle, but many Westerners struggle to find security in it. Security and discipline are things that potential converts find most appealing. With its culture being preserved and protected from the modern influence, people find themselves fulfilled and safe when they convert to Islam. The Muslim community is far more coherent, and its values are the reason for it.

3. DECLINE DUE TO BURNING SOCIAL ISSUES

The decline of Christianity is not only due to Christians turning to other religions. Conservative and traditional views over burning social issues are also causing irreconcilable differences between churchgoers and the church. One of the most controversial issues is homosexuality.

3.1. Homosexuality and Christianity

In the first half of the twentieth century, religious thinkers considered homosexual people to be ill and a homosexual person was encouraged to seek psychological help to deal with their condition (Hasbany 12). An author of one of the first major Catholic press releases introduced an analogy of a fishbone when talking about homosexuals and compared homosexuals as a fishbone stuck in the throat of the Christian Church that refuses to go away (Hasbany 8). Statements like this make Christianity in general appear as intolerant and outdated in the eyes of many. People struggle with wanting to be a good Christian and respecting other people's lifestyles and choices. No significant progress has been made since the fishbone analogy was introduced forty years ago, but several church groups are willing to open the topic up for discussion (Hasbany 8).

When Christians are asked about the reasons for their moral values, they turn to the Bible. However, there have been several arguments regarding the importance of the Bible and whether it should really be seen as the sole source for a Christian's moral thinking.

Thomas Aquinas held that all the necessary ethical principles were — in principle — discernible by human reason alone, Christ and the apostles merely adding a few details to the moral law; the moral norms of the Bible serve simply to make morality clear to

those — the vast majority of humankind — unable to work it out for themselves.

(Moore 56)

The Bible is thought to generally disapprove of homosexuality and everything that comes with it and so, Christians feel that they have legitimate grounds to condemn it as well. “The texts most often cited in this connection are Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26—7, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10; it will be necessary to look at each of these in turn, to see what they actually say and do not say” (Moore 57). There are, however, problems with these texts. One of those is the manner in which they are written; it is not always clear what they are actually trying to say (Moore 57). Also, when reading the Bible and interpreting it, our personal preferences can be a problem and can prevent us from interpreting it correctly (Moore 57). Those of us who approve of the homosexual way of life will try to find parts that approve of it as well (Moore 57). Those who condemn homosexuality will do the same (Moore 57). The Bible has many interpretations and our inability to interpret it objectively is the reason for it. Another problem with the Bible is, of course, the Christian Church (Moore 58). Many Christians choose to turn to the Church and see it as the only real source of objective interpretation of the Bible without even trying to understand it on their own. The Church made its stand clear a long time ago – it condemns it and perceives it as an abomination. Even though Christians turn to the Church as an authority, the fact is that the Church does not interpret the Bible objectively, but in the way that suits it. If we look back and think about the Church’s role in, let’s say, slavery, we see how this is true. Slavery was said to be in accordance with God’s plan and moral values. Christian preachers and ministers approved of slavery and denied the fact that all people are made in the likeness and the image of God, regardless of the colour of their skin. In turn, slave owners were legitimate members of the Church and were perceived as businessmen, even though they abused and tortured their

slaves. Was slavery right just because the Church said it was? Of course not. Are non-white people any less human because their skin is dark? Of course not.

We now know how atrocious and reprehensible slavery was. We understand that abusing people, regardless of the colour of their skin is wrong. Now, the Church admits it, too. Slavery and homosexuality cannot be compared in any way, but the role and the stands of the Church as an authority can. Just because the Church says something is right does not mean it is. And this is something that can be applied to homosexuality and something that a lot of modern Christians understand. Only those who are utterly ignorant separate the terms homosexual and Christian. Sadly, a lot of Christians are just that – ignorant. They blindly follow whatever the Church says and refuse to think for themselves. This is one of the reasons many people, not just Britons, decide to distance themselves from such a community. And rightfully so. If the Bible says that God loves all of His children, how can the Church exclude those who they choose to dislike? It cannot. Every day, more and more Christians become aware of the fact that the Christian Church does not work in the alignment with what God would want. Ministers lose their credibility and people turn away from them. Most organized religions have already stated their official positions on homosexuality and the civil rights of homosexuals, while Christianity still seems to struggle with it. There is little or no flexibility on this issue as far as the Catholic Church is concerned, something a lot of Christians disapprove of. Increasing numbers of homosexual Christians choose to renounce their faith since they feel rejected and judged by it.

CONCLUSION

In the last fifty years, Christianity has been facing a sudden decline. Although the Christian culture has been a part of the British identity for over a millennium, people are starting to renounce their faith. Globalization has had an immense impact on the Christian culture and its believers have different ways of dealing with it. Some see Christianity as a thing of the past, something outdated, and choose to join new religious movements created by the consumer society in order to promote consumerism. This way, those who are heavily influenced by globalization still have a so-called religion that can provide them with spiritual fulfilment. On the other hand, those who reject and condemn consumerism choose to join faiths untouched by modernity, such as Islam. Although the Christian Church still upholds the same values, its believers turn away from it and condemn its primitive standpoints over issues such as homosexuality. The Church hinders more than it helps in this case and its believers resent that to the point that they renounce their faith. If some changes are not made in the next decade, Christianity may no longer have a place in Great Britain. This is a task on which both the Church and the churchgoers need to work together, instead of wasting time on disputes. As impossible as it may seem, the Christian community should look up to the Muslim community or even the New Age community and restate the unity that once made the Christian culture so desirable.

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